STUDENT-ATHLETES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SALERNO: EVIDENCE TO INFORM AN INSTITUTIONAL DUAL-CAREER FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT
This exploratory study maps the student-athlete population at the University of Salerno, revealing widespread competitive sport engagement and structural challenges in balancing academic and athletic demands. Students express strong support for formal recognition and flexible measures. Findings provide a solid evidence base for developing a dual-career framework aligned with national reforms and European guidelines.

KEYWORDS
Higher education; academic flexibility; sport policy; institutional recognition; educational equity.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, both the European and Italian university systems have undergone a substantial reconfiguration in the conceptualisation and institutional positioning of physical activity and sport within higher education, professional training, and public policy. This evolving landscape reflects a broader shift toward recognising sport as an integral component of educational development, professional competence, and social welfare (Eather et al. 2023), a transformation also reflected in recent national reforms, including the 2019 restructuring of the sport system (Italian Government, 2019) and the 2023 constitutional amendment recognising the educational and social value of sport (Italian Parliament, 2023). Within this context, *dual career*, conceived in the university setting as the concurrent engagement in academic study and competitive athletic practice, has emerged as a critical domain of innovation (Guidotti et al., 2023), requiring structured institutional responses and evidence-based regulatory frameworks (Cariati et al., 2024). Universities are increasingly expected to recognize the educational, social, and developmental value of sport, and to ensure that students engaged in high-level athletic activity can access conditions that support both academic continuity and sporting excellence, in line with ongoing cultural and organisational changes that are reshaping kinesiology, the configuration of sport professions, and the integration of physical activity into welfare and educational systems.

International research has consistently shown that student-athletes face specific challenges related to time management, competitive pressure, mobility, and the need for flexible academic arrangements (Gomez et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2020; Mao, 2025; Quinaud, 2025; De Maio, 2025). These challenges often intensify in the absence of institutional mechanisms designed

to support dual career pathways (Vidal-Vilaplana, 2022). At the same time, national and supranational reforms are reshaping the professional landscape of kinesiology and sport, emphasizing the importance of specialized competencies, structured training pathways, and evidence-based policies (Izzicupo et al., 2022). Italian research has documented the evolving identity of sport sciences and the consolidation of kinesiology professions (D'Isanto et al., 2022; Esposito et al., 2024a; Esposito et al., 2024b; Esposito et al., 2024c; Altavilla, 2023; Raiola et al., 2022). In this context, dual-career policies represent institutional tools that contribute to educational equity, the protection of the right to engage in sport, and the development of the professional profiles required by the reformed kinesiology and sport sectors. Recent reforms of the sport system (Italian Government, 2019) and the formal recognition of kinesiology professions (Italian Government, 2021) have highlighted the need for universities to provide learning environments capable of accommodating the demands of competitive sport. Within this national framework, the CRUI4Sport initiative, promoted by the Conference of Italian University Rectors, has played a strategic role in encouraging universities to value students' sporting experience and to adopt shared institutional policies for dual career. The initiative has also underscored a critical issue: many universities lack systematic data on their student-athlete populations, making it difficult to design effective and coherent regulations that respond to real needs rather than assumptions.

Despite growing attention, the Italian context remains highly heterogeneous. Numerous universities still do not have dedicated dual career regulations, and even fewer possess updated empirical evidence on the characteristics, distribution, and needs of student-athletes. This absence of data represents a significant limitation. Without a clear understanding of the student-athlete

population, it is challenging to develop interventions aligned with ongoing transformations in kinesiology, with European recommendations, and with national strategies aimed at strengthening the educational and social role of sport. The efforts promoted at national level, including CRUI4Sport, highlight the urgency of adopting a systematic, data-driven approach.

It is within this context that the present study is situated. At the University of Salerno, as in many Italian universities, no structured information was available on the size and distribution of student-athletes, nor on the main difficulties they encounter in balancing academic and sporting commitments. This lack of evidence hindered the development of a dedicated regulation capable of addressing actual needs and supporting students in a coherent and equitable manner.

The initial hypothesis guiding this work was that the student-athlete community would be numerically significant, distributed across departments, and characterized by systematic challenges in managing academic and sporting responsibilities. It was further hypothesized that, in the absence of institutional measures, these challenges could affect academic progression, perceived legitimacy, and the likelihood of seeking support from teaching staff.

To address this knowledge gap, an exploratory survey was administered to the entire student population of the University of Salerno. The aim was to identify the presence of student-athletes, describe their characteristics, and capture the main difficulties they report in balancing study and sport. This article presents the results of the survey, discusses their implications, and outlines how these findings can serve as an empirical foundation for developing a university regulation dedicated to dual career, in line with the institutional and professional transformations currently reshaping the role of sport within the European higher education space.

2. Method

This study adopted an exploratory, cross-sectional design aimed at obtaining a first systematic overview of the student-athlete population at the University of Salerno. Given the absence of institutional data on the number, distribution, and characteristics of students engaged in competitive sport, an online questionnaire was developed to collect descriptive information on their academic profile, sport involvement, perceived difficulties, and support needs. The instrument was designed to inform the development of a potential dual career regulation at the university.

3. Participants and Procedure

The target population consisted of all undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled at the University of Salerno during the data collection period (March-May 2026). The questionnaire was disseminated through institutional communication channels and made accessible via a dedicated link. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and open to all students, regardless of their sport involvement. Students who indicated that they did not practice competitive sport were automatically directed to the end of the questionnaire, as the focus of the study was specifically on student-athletes.

Before accessing the questionnaire, participants were presented with an introductory note explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the data protection measures adopted.

Data collection took place over a defined period and no incentives were offered.

4. Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of four sections, each addressing a specific dimension relevant to dual career.

1. **General Information** This section collected demographic and academic data, including gender, age, degree programme (bachelor's, master's, single-cycle), department, and year of study.

2. **Sport Profile** Students were asked whether they practiced competitive sport. Those who answered "yes" completed items on sport discipline, competition level (regional, national, international), federation membership, weekly training and competition hours, and periods of peak competitive intensity during the academic year. These items allowed for a detailed characterization of sport engagement, consistent with dual career literature.

3. **Study-Sport Balance** This section explored the perceived difficulty of balancing academic and sport commitments through a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "not difficult at all" to "extremely difficult". Students could indicate specific challenges encountered, such as overlapping schedules, difficulty recovering missed classes, exam-competition conflicts, study load, or travel for competitions. The questionnaire also asked whether students had ever requested support from teaching staff and included a scale to evaluate the perceived availability of such support.

4. **Needs and Proposals** This section investigated students' perceived needs and preferred support measures, including exam flexibility, possibility to recover missed classes or laboratories, academic tutoring, recognition of credits for high-level sport activity, psychological or organizational support, and dedicated study spaces at the university sports center. Students were also asked whether they would support the introduction of an official "student-athlete status" and were given the opportunity to provide open comments or suggestions.

5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the characteristics of the student-athlete population and identify recurring patterns in perceived difficulties and support needs. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables, while mean values and distributions were examined for ordinal items. Open-ended responses were analyzed through qualitative content analysis to identify recurrent themes and complementary insights.

6. Ethical Considerations

The study complied with national and European data protection regulations. No personal identifiers were collected, and all responses were stored securely and processed exclusively for research and institutional planning purposes.

7. Results

The survey involved 945 respondents, of whom 488 identified themselves as student-athletes, confirming the presence of a large and heterogeneous dual-career population at the University of Salerno. The following subsections present the main findings, supported by descriptive statistics, contingency tables, and graphical representations.

8. Demographic and Academic Profile

Student-athletes were distributed across all departments, with higher concentrations in the Department of Human Sciences (17.4%), where Exercise and Sport Sciences degree programmes are offered, and Engineering (Industrial Engineering 12.5%; Information Engineering 8.4%). Most respondents were enrolled in bachelor's programmes, particularly in the first year (37.3%), indicating that competitive sport is especially prevalent among early-stage students.

Gender distribution showed a prevalence of males (61.3%) over females (38.7%).

9. Sport Profile

The majority of student-athletes competed at regional level (62.7%), but a substantial proportion reported national (28.7%) and international (8.6%) competition, confirming the presence of high-performance athletes within the university.

Sport engagement was structurally organized: 89.3% were registered with a sport federation, and weekly training loads were considerable. Most students

trained 6-10 hours per week (41.6%), followed by 11-15 hours (29.7%), while 15% exceeded 15 hours, indicating intensive sport commitments.

Peak competitive periods were concentrated in the second semester (43.9%), followed by the winter exam session (25%), highlighting the temporal overlap between academic and sport calendars.

10. Study-Sport Balance

Balancing academic and sport commitments was perceived as challenging by most respondents. Difficulty ratings showed that:

- 45.3% reported *moderate difficulty* (level 3),
- 29.9% reported *high difficulty* (level 4),
- 10% reported *extreme difficulty* (level 5).

Only 2.9% indicated that conciliation was “not difficult at all”.

The most frequent difficulties were:

- Study load (54.5%)
- Overlap between class schedules and training (52.9%)
- Difficulty recovering missed lessons (36.3%)
- Exam–competition conflicts (33%)
- Travel for competitions (32.4%)

Only 0.2% reported no difficulties.

11. Support from Teaching Staff

Despite the high level of difficulty, 93% of student-athletes had never requested support from teaching staff, suggesting a perceived lack of legitimacy or absence of institutional mechanisms. Among the small group who requested support (7%), perceived availability was generally adequate (34.4%), though 47% rated it as insufficient or scarce, indicating variability and lack of standardization.

12. Needs and Proposed Measures

Students expressed clear preferences for institutional measures supporting dual career:

- Recognition of ECTS credits for high-level sport (63.5%)
- Recovery of classes and laboratory activities (59%)
- Exam flexibility (40.6%)
- Psychological/organizational support (21.7%)
- Academic tutoring (21.1%)
- Study spaces at the university sports center (14.1%)

Furthermore, 93.2% of respondents supported the introduction of an official *student-athlete status*, confirming the strong demand for institutional recognition.

13. Open-Ended Responses

Qualitative analysis of open comments revealed recurring themes:

- Need for institutional recognition of the student-athlete role
- Requests for greater didactic flexibility (e.g., dedicated exam sessions, tolerance for mandatory attendance, access to recorded lectures)
- Need for tutorial and psychological support
- Logistical issues related to internships, transportation, and access to sport facilities

These insights reinforce the quantitative findings and highlight structural barriers affecting dual-career management.

14. Inferential Analysis (Chi-Square Tests)

Several statistically significant associations emerged:

- Gender × Competition level ($p = 0.03875$): males more concentrated in regional/national levels; females more evenly distributed, with slightly higher international representation.
- Gender × Federation membership ($p = 0.03154$): males more represented among non-registered athletes.
- Course level × Weekly training hours ($p = 0.02682$): bachelor students more represented in higher training loads.
- Competition level × Weekly training hours ($p < 0.001$): international athletes concentrated in highest training loads.

- Federation membership × Weekly training hours ($p < 0.001$): registered athletes train more hours.
- Weekly training hours × Difficulty of conciliation ($p = 0.0007576$): higher training loads associated with higher difficulty.
- Weekly training hours × Request for support ($p = 0.01385$): athletes with higher loads more likely to request support.
- Weekly training hours × Support for student-athlete status ($p = 0.004128$): athletes with higher loads almost unanimously favorable.
- Federation membership × Difficulty ($p = 0.002632$): registered athletes report higher difficulty.
- Competition level × Request for support ($p = 0.004319$): international athletes more likely to request support.
- Competition level × Peak intensity period ($p < 0.001$): national/international athletes concentrated in second semester.

These results confirm that sport intensity, competition level, and structured engagement are strongly associated with academic challenges, reinforcing the need for institutional dual-career policies.

15. Discussion

The results of this exploratory study provide a coherent picture of the student-athlete population at the University of Salerno and align with several trends already highlighted in recent dual-career literature (De Maio et al., 2025). The substantial presence of student-athletes across departments, combined with high weekly training loads and structured competitive commitments, confirms that dual career represents a structural condition

rather than an exceptional circumstance. This finding is consistent with evidence showing that high-performance student-athletes frequently experience organizational strain and complex negotiations between academic and athletic responsibilities (Gomez, 2018).

A central result concerns the systematic temporal misalignment between academic activities and sport calendars. This pattern mirrors international analyses documenting time management difficulties, mobility constraints, and competitive pressures as core challenges in dual-career pathways (Vidal-Vilaplana, 2022; Steele, 2020). The very limited recourse to academic support observed in our sample, despite substantial perceived difficulty, suggests that student-athletes may not perceive existing university structures as accessible or legitimate sources of help. Similar dynamics have been reported in other Italian contexts, where the introduction of dual-career regulations increased perceived legitimacy and improved help-seeking behaviors (Cariati, 2024).

The psychological dimension also emerges as relevant. Although this study did not directly assess psychological variables, the reported difficulties resonate with broader research on emotional strain, perceived pressure, and wellbeing among student-athletes (Mao, 2025). The association between intense sport engagement and organizational stress aligns with evidence showing that sport participation can have both protective and challenging effects on mental health, depending on contextual and institutional conditions (Eather, 2023).

Another key finding concerns the strong and nearly unanimous demand for institutional recognition through an official student-athlete status. This preference reflects trends observed in recent European studies, where student-athletes emphasize the importance of transparent procedures, predictable flexibility, and formal acknowledgment of their commitments (De

Maio, 2025; Quinaud, 2025). The convergence of preferences around flexible exam arrangements, recovery of classes and laboratories, and recognition of high-level sport activity is consistent with analyses of dual-career implementation in European-funded projects (Guidotti, 2023) and with expert evaluations of dual-career quality across higher education institutions (Izzicupo, 2022).

The Italian context adds a further interpretative layer. The ongoing transformation of kinesiology professions and the reorganization of sport-related academic pathways (Altavilla, 2023; D'Isanto, 2022; Esposito, 2024a; Esposito, 2024b; Esposito, 2024c; Raiola, 2022) highlight the need for universities to adopt organizational models capable of supporting students engaged in competitive sport. The alignment between student-athlete needs and national reforms suggests that dual-career policies can contribute not only to individual wellbeing but also to the coherence and modernization of university education in sport sciences.

Overall, the results indicate that dual career at the University of Salerno is characterized by structural challenges, limited institutional visibility, and strong demand for recognition. These findings are fully consistent with recent literature and reinforce the need for evidence-based institutional frameworks capable of supporting student-athletes in a coherent and equitable manner.

16. Conclusions

This study was designed to provide an evidence based foundation for developing a dual career framework at the University of Salerno. The exploratory survey achieved this goal by revealing a coherent and institutionally relevant picture of student athletes' experiences, needs, and

expectations. Rather than describing isolated challenges, the findings highlight a structural condition: competitive sport intersects with university life in ways that require coordinated, predictable, and equitable institutional responses.

The data show that student athletes navigate their academic pathways within organizational rhythms that are not designed with sport commitments in mind. This misalignment generates recurring friction points (temporal, logistical, and pedagogical) that cannot be addressed through individual effort alone. The very limited recourse to academic support, despite substantial perceived difficulty, further indicates that students do not currently perceive the university as equipped to respond to dual career needs. This gap between lived experience and institutional structures is the central finding of the study.

At the same time, the survey reveals a strong and unified demand for formal recognition and structured measures. The near unanimous support for an official student athlete status, and the convergence around specific forms of flexibility and support, provide a clear direction for policy development. These preferences are fully aligned with national reforms and European dual career guidelines, suggesting that the University of Salerno is operating within a favorable normative and cultural context for innovation. This alignment is further supported by recent European evidence showing that student-athletes consistently call for transparent procedures, institutional recognition, and predictable flexibility (De Maio, 2025; Quinaud, 2025).

From a policy perspective, the study indicates that introducing a dual career regulation would not only respond to a real and widespread need but would also enhance educational equity, student wellbeing, and institutional coherence. A formal framework could legitimize help seeking, standardize procedures across departments, and ensure that high level sport participation does not become a barrier to academic success. In doing so, the university

would position itself in line with national priorities and international best practices, recognizing sport as an integral component of personal and educational development. Evidence from other Italian contexts confirms that dedicated dual-career regulations can strengthen perceived legitimacy and improve access to academic support (Cariati, 2024).

Moreover, the broader literature on sport participation and wellbeing reinforces the importance of institutional environments capable of mitigating psychological strain and supporting balanced development (Eather, 2023; Mao, 2025).

In summary, the study demonstrates that dual career at the University of Salerno is both necessary and feasible. The empirical evidence provides a clear roadmap for designing a regulation that is responsive, equitable, and aligned with broader policy frameworks. Implementing such a framework would represent a strategic investment in student wellbeing and institutional innovation, strengthening the university's commitment to supporting diverse academic trajectories.

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